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XXII. *A Letter to Dr. William Watson, F. R. S. giving some Account of the Manna Tree, and of the Tarantula: By Dominico Cirillo, M. D. Professor of Natural History at the University of Naples.*

S I R,

London, Feb. 4, 1770.

Read April 26,
1770.

AS some natural productions of our warm Neapolitan climate seemed to engage your curiosity, to know the particular facts relating to some of them, and as I had an opportunity of examining every spot of the kingdom of Naples and Sicily, in the year 1766; I shall try to communicate to you the observations I made upon two very curious and interesting subjects, *viz.* the Manna tree and the Tarantula. My misfortune is, that I have not my papers with me, which would have enabled me to give you a more full and satisfactory account; but, however, I flatter myself, I shall be able to trace out what is more essential and material to the purpose.

The Manna tree, commonly called *Ornus* by the botanists, is a kind of ash tree, and is to be found

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under the name of *Fraxinus Ornus*, in Linneus' Sp. Plant. I shall say but very little concerning the botanic description of this tree, because it has been given by all the writers; and I shall only observe, that this kind of *fraxinus* is very easily distinguished from the common *fraxinus* five *fraxinus excelsior*, by the leaves, which are round at the top, *subrotunda*, *integerrima*. This tree very seldom grows to a considerable height, nor does it acquire a considerable bulk; in general it is from 10 to 20 feet high, the trunk is commonly of 5 or 6 inches in diameter, and the branches are pretty numerous, and irregularly spread: these dimensions, however, vary, if these trees are not crowded together, and have more liberty of growth. The Manna tree is common, not only in Calabria and Sicily, but also on the famous mountain Garganus, situated near the old town of Sypontum upon the Adriatic; and is mentioned even by Horace as an inhabitant of that mountain,

“ Aut Aquilonibus querceta Gargani laborant

“ Aut foliis viduantur Orni.

In all the woods near Naples the Manna tree is to be found very often; but, for want of cultivation, it never produces any manna, and is rather a shrub than a tree. The manner, in which the manna is obtained from the Ornus, though very simple, has been yet very much misunderstood by all those who travelled in the kingdom of Naples; and among other things they seem to agree, that the best and purest manna is obtained from the leaves of the tree; but this, I believe, is an opinion taken from the doctrine of the antients, and received as an incontestable observation,
without

without consulting nature. I never saw such a kind, and all those who are employed in the gathering of the manna, know of none that comes from the leaves. The manna is generally of two kinds; not on account of the intrinsic quality of them being different, but only because they are got in a different manner. In order to have the manna, those who have the management of the woods of the Orni in the month of July and August, when the weather is very dry and warm, make an oblong incision, and take off from the bark of the tree about three inches in length, and two in breadth; they leave the wound open, and by degrees the manna runs out, and is almost suddenly thickened to its proper consistence, and is found adhering to the bark of the tree. This manna which is collected in baskets, and goes under the name of *manna grassa*, is put in a dry place, because moist and wet places will soon dissolve it again. This first kind is often in large irregular pieces of a brownish colour, and frequently is full of dust and other impurities. But when the people want to have a very fine manna, they apply to the incision of the bark, thin straw, or small bits of shrubs, so that the manna, in coming out, runs upon those bodies, and is collected in a sort of regular tubes, which give it the name of *manna in cannoli*, that is, manna in tubes: this second kind is more esteemed, and always preferred to the other, because it is free and clear. There is indeed a third kind of manna, which is not commonly to be met with, and which I have seen after I left Calabria: it is very white, like sugar; but as it is rather for curiosity than for use, I shall say no more of it. The two sorts of

manna already mentioned undergo no kind of preparation whatsoever, before they are exported; sometimes they are finer, particularly the *manna grassa*, and sometimes very dirty and full of impurities; but the Neapolitans have no interest in adulterating the manna, because they always have a great deal more than what they generally export; and if manna is kept in the magazines, it receives often very great hurt by the Southern winds, so common in our part of the world. The changes of the weather produce a sudden alteration in the time that the manna is to be gathered; and, for this reason, when the summer is rainy, the manna is always very scarce and very bad.

With regard to the use we make of manna in the practice of physic, I believe it is of very little consequence; for it cannot be employed alone as a cathartic, because you must give a considerable dose in order to obtain a tolerable operation; it is commonly prescribed for children, who sooner take it because it is sweet, and sometimes is given in colds and coughs: the generality of the physicians at Naples often give manna and salts to keep the body open in the beginning of many fevers, in which there is a foulness of the *primæ viæ*. We do not give any preference to the manna, in any particular case, and rather consider it as an article of trade than a very useful medicine.

After this short account of the manna, according to my promise, I shall give you a little of the history of the Tarantula, because I have had an opportunity of examining the effects of this animal, in the province of Taranto, where it is found in great abundance:

abundance: but I am afraid I shall have nothing more to say, than that the surprizing cure of the bite of the Tarantula, by music, has not the least truth in it; and that it is only an invention of the people, who want to get a little money, by dancing when they say the tarantism begins. I make no doubt but sometimes the heat of the climate contributes very much to warm their imagination, and to throw them into a delirium, which may be in some measure cured by music: but several experiments have been tried with the Tarantula; and neither men nor animals, after the bite, have had any other complaint, but a very trifling inflammation upon the part, like those produced by the bite of a scorpion, which go off by themselves without any danger at all. In Sicily, where the summer is still warmer than in any part of the kingdom of Naples, the Tarantula is never dangerous, and music is never employed for the cure of the pretended tarantism. It is no doubt very extraordinary, that a man of sense, and a physician of great learning, as Baglivi, should have been satisfied with the account of this disorder; and that, instead of examining the fact by experiments, he should rather have tried to explain it: but even philosophers like very much to meet with wonderful and extraordinary things, and though they are against all reason, still they want them to be true, and endeavour to find out the cause of them. Every year this surprizing disorder loses ground; and I am persuaded, that in a very little while it will entirely lose its credit. The Neapolitan physicians all look upon the Tarantula in the same light, particularly after the ingenious book published on
this

this subject, by the learned Dr. Serao, who, by various experiments, has proved, that the bite of the Tarantula never produced any bad effects, and that music never had any thing to do with it. The natural history and the description of this spider is so well known, that I think it quite unnecessary to enter into any farther particulars relating to it.

I hope I shall be able to send you, in a few months, some of my observations upon mount *Ætna*, and several curious things concerning the natural history, both of Sicily and Calabria; I am, in the mean time,

Your most obedient

humble servant,

Dominico Cirillo.